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TAGS: PTER SOCI MARR I2

SUBJECT: POLICE CHALLENGE VBID, EXPLOSION ENSUES

CLASSIFIED BY: Mark G. Davison, Team Leader, Provincial Reconstruction Team, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (U) This is a PRT Najaf/Diwaniyah Cable.

VBID EXPLODES IN KUFA

¶12. (C) Our locally engaged staff in Najaf report that, on May 8, 2007 at approximately 1015, a device identified by Iraqi Security Forces as a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBID) detonated near the Sherhistani Square in Kufa City, causing death, injury and property damage. Accurate figures of fatalities and casualties are as yet difficult to obtain -- the Provincial Director General for Health reported to the press the figures of 16 dead and 70 injured; later, the Mayor of Kufa was quoted as numbering 20 dead and 40 injured. These discrepancies are likely due to the fact that the injured have been taken to both South-Central Hospital and the Teaching Hospital. The severity of the injuries will likely cause the ultimate number of casualties to increase.

MASSIVE EXPLOSION

¶13. (C) Based on damage to an adjacent building, which had partially collapsed, the explosion was a powerful one. The explosion took place during the mid-morning period of high pedestrian traffic. Heavy foot traffic was swelled by students who attend various colleges in the area and casual laborers who congregate in the Square to be contacted by daily employers.

SECURITY SCRUTINY -- KUFA BRIDGE NOT LIKELY THE TARGET

¶14. (C) Eyewitness report that the driver of the vehicle had stopped in front of a restaurant, about 30 feet from the Square itself. Iraqi traffic police, who check vehicles at that location, challenged the driver of the vehicle and the vehicle detonated.

¶15. (C) IP have informed our LES that the vehicle was a Chevrolet Caprice with forged license plates. This latter aspect could well have raised the suspicions of the traffic police. Iraqi Police (IP) headquarters sources question whether the driver himself was intent on being a suicide bomber or not. The IP discount the concern that nearby Kufa Bridge was the actual target for the VBID, stating to us that it was more likely that the incident was designed to target the public in a way to produce the maximum number of deaths and injuries. They argue against the bridge as target (recalling the recent attacks on bridges in Baghdad) by pointing to the larger number of checkpoints necessary for the vehicle to pass to reach the bridge. In contrast, the site of the explosion at the Square itself was the first area of vehicle search encountered.

¶6. (C) Following the explosion, the Deputy IP Chief visited the area. IP have increased checkpoints both in Kufa and in nearby Najaf.

COMMENT -- TRAIN AND EQUIP

¶7. (C) This is not the first time that Sherhistani Square has been the site of an explosion -- there have been several, including in April, 2006 when the perpetrator was killed there by an outraged public while trying to escape the scene. The incident demonstrates the continuing need of the IP to be further trained and equipped, so that their initial challenge to suspicious vehicles is not so catastrophic. The Governor of Najaf continues to make this point in his contacts with the Ministry of the Interior and with Coalition senior representatives.

DAVISON